Ideas and Political Mobilization in Africa

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Summary

Ideas play a key role in political mobilization around the world, and often ideas travel cross-nationally. It is important to recognize the diverse influences and iterative processes that produce political ideologies and influence mobilization. The sociological literature on diffusion offers scholars a framework for thinking about and recognizing the channels through which ideas move. When tracing such channels, scholars must also be cognizant of the ways that movement of this sort affects ideas and ideologies themselves; international concepts will always be read through domestic lenses, and local realities prompt reinterpretation of global ideas. In this article, Black Consciousness offers a case study to analyze some key channels through which global ideas moved and impacted a university student movement in 1970s South Africa. Influenced by anti-colonialism and anti-racism discourses originating in Europe, the Caribbean, and the United States, Black Consciousness thinkers took these ideas and refashioned them into their own ideology. They used relational networks as well as channels like art, theatre, fashion, and development projects to mobilize a constituency and to propagate their own ideas, which have endured beyond the end of the formal Black Consciousness Movement.

Keywords

Diffusion of ideas; Black Consciousness; Négritude; Apartheid; Anti-colonialism; Anti-racism; Liberation ideology; Pentecostalism; African diaspora

Abbreviations:

SASO – South African Students' Organization

BC – Black Consciousness

BCM – Black Consciousness Movement

BCP – Black Community Programmes

ANC – African National Congress

PAC – Pan-Africanist Congress

NUSAS – National Union of Students

COSAS – Congress of South African Students

SNCC – Students' Nonviolent Coordination Committee

NOI – Nation of Islam

Introduction

Ideas may seem fluid, ephemeral, and mutating, but there are few things more integral to initiating social and political change than powerful ideas. Consequently, understanding how ideas emerge, how they are developed, how they are organized into ideologies, and how they move across time and space is a crucial aspect to understanding the events they influence. This article links the movement of ideas to political mobilization in Africa, and considers when, where, and how particular ideas take root and grow. It will begin by offering a framework for understanding the ways ideas move, based in the literature on diffusion; it will identify some key mechanisms by which ideas are propagated by political and social organizations and offer some preliminary examples; and it will conclude with a case study analysis of the construction of Black Consciousness as an ideology in South Africa that has drawn on ideas from around the world.

This article deals with a number of abstract concepts, so it is important to establish some working definitions at its outset. By ideas, here I refer to a holistic grouping of concepts, beliefs, and principles that are closely held by an individual or group. Some ideas are religiously or culturally-grounded, like belief in prophecy; some are deeply rooted in intellectual traditions, like the idea of African unity that underpins the Pan-Africanist movement. Many, and many of the most powerful ideas, combine aspects of both; take, for example, South Africa's combination of international human rights discourse with the African communalist concept of ubuntu during post-apartheid efforts at reconciliation and nation-building. Sometimes ideas become organized into ideologies, which are a set of related ideas that act as the underpinning for (often political) movements. Ideologies are frequently change-oriented and seek major political or social restructuring, or to address a perceived problem. To do so they need to propagate their ideas widely, and to mobilize a constituency around them. In this way, the movement of ideas is closely linked to aspects of political mobilization. But this basic description runs the risk of suggesting that ideas always – or predominantly – move instrumentally, as part of active indoctrination efforts by believers in those ideas. This is not true. Ideas often move in ways beyond the bounds of explicit human intent; and they are always interpreted and adapted in new ways for the contexts into which they move. This article will use the literature on diffusion to offer some suggestions about the multiple and varied ways in which ideas move and affect aspects of political mobilization.

Conditions and Mechanisms for the Diffusion of Ideas

The literature on diffusion originates in sociology; in 1962 Everett Rogers' seminal *Diffusion of Innovations* tracked the spread and adoption of varying technologies – from farming techniques to medical practices – and formed a theory of innovation diffusion to explain the process by

which these technologies successfully spread, or did not (Rogers 2003). Rogers' work has spawned a large, inter-disciplinary subfield in which diffusion is used to make sense of the ways that technologies, practices, and movements spread across time and space (Givan et al. 2010). It has been used to explain, among other things, the spread of economic policies (Simmons et al. 2006), educational practices (Meyer et al. 1992), decolonization (Strang 1990), social movements (Givan et al. 2010; Rane & Salem 2012), and collective action (Tarrow 1989; McAdam & Rucht, 1993; McAdam 1995). These latter two fields have begun to grapple with the ways that ideas themselves diffuse. It is challenging for researchers to track and measure the spread of ideas in a systematic way because, unlike other types of innovations, ideas are not physically observable. Instead, researchers must track the impact that ideas have when they are taken up in new contexts. In this regard, tracking the diffusion of ideas through their manifestation in political mobilization offers a lens into how certain ideas move, and how they are adopted and – importantly – adapted across time and space.

McAdam and Rucht (1993) undertake some of this work, analyzing the cross-national diffusion of ideas and practices between anti-nuclear activists in Germany and the United States. Their model of mixed relational and non-relational channels by which political ideas diffuse is useful for understanding some of the examples this article will explore. Essentially, diffusion involves the spread of something – an idea, a practice, a technology – within a social system, from a transmitter to an adopter (Strang & Soule 1998, 266) through channels that link the two parties (McAdam & Rucht 1993, 59). These channels are at the crux of understanding how ideas move. They have traditionally been understood relationally, or to work through direct personal contact between adopters and transmitters (McAdam & Rucht 1993, 59). This type of diffusion has historically been extremely influential at the local and regional levels, particularly where

intermediaries and brokers of ideas move through existing networks. One such example is the spread of the Maji Maji prophecy at the beginning of the twentieth century through what is today southern Tanzania. Despite regional differences in the approach to and development of the ensuing conflict, Iliffe has demonstrated the important role that *hongos,* or messengers, played in physically bringing the *maji* medicine to villages throughout the countryside and persuading communities to join the movement (Iliffe 1967). Similarly, McAdam, Tarrow & Tilly have identified brokers using existing trade routes and labour union networks as a key factor in mobilizing Mau Mau resistance to British colonial rule in Kenya during the 1950s (McAdam, Tarrow & Tilly 2001, 102-3). In the cases of both the Maji Maji War and Mau Mau, shared cultural idioms like anti-sorcery movements, prophecy, and oathing facilitated the spread of these movements, across ethnic boundaries in the case of Maji Maji, and widely among the Kikuyu in the case of Mau Mau.

Migration has also played an important role in creating wide-reaching relational channels for the diffusion of ideas. The African diaspora has its roots in the coercive and tragic history of the slave trade, but as Akyeampong (2000) notes, in the intervening centuries the diaspora has been through waves of migration that have shaped and reshaped the communities of the African diaspora abroad – and in some cases, at home. New migratory patterns and new communication technologies often facilitate familial and communal links between communities in Africa and new homes abroad, creating channels through which remittances, people, and ideas can move. From the perspective of political ideas, the diaspora has been the source of political innovations and sometimes disruptions; for example, when political opposition parties operate from outside their country of origin – as Rwanda's in South Africa, and, until recently, Eritrea's in Ethiopia and vice-versa. These channels sometimes act as conduits of political change or exchange

between host and home country. For instance, before becoming first the Prime Minister, and now the President, of Somalia, Mohammed Abdullahi Mohammed worked in local government in New York state for many years, and upon his election to the presidency he was praised in the international press for bringing technocratic competence and administrative experience to the post. But not all ideas or practices move successfully through diffusion channels to find fertile ground and be adopted. Some founder. Nauja Kleist's work on development organizations among the Somali diaspora in Europe highlights the ways that these groups have shaped themselves into moral communities, organized around ideas of modernity (as conceived through building regional political alliances rather than lineage-based ones) and peace (in contrast to the violence of warlordism within Somalia) (Kleist 2008, 316). Kleist argues that these communities are bound together by their diaspora identity which also shapes their political ideas, but notes the challenges they face in extending their influence beyond their immediate communities. These include their failure to overcome divisions within the diaspora itself, and to influence events in Somalia (Kleist 2008, 320). In this case relational and ideational links are not strong enough to overcome existing societal divisions, and structural challenges on the ground.

But how do ideas move and how are they mobilized *beyond* relational links? One way is through the influence and consumption of media. Traditional forms of mass media – television, newspapers, and radio – are considered in the foundational literature on diffusion; Rogers argues that these channels are highly effective in disseminating information, but are fundamentally less persuasive than interpersonal, or relational, channels in persuading someone to adopt an innovation or an idea (Rogers 2003, 154-5). Despite the fact that mass media is a nonrelational channel, it can be effective in persuading adopters to adopt an idea if they perceive a social construction of similarity between themselves and the transmitter (McAdam and Rucht 1993,

60). That is to say, if an adopter identifies with a transmitter they are more likely to adopt the transmitted idea, even if it comes through nonrelational links like mass media. And in fact, Soule has argued that the more a potential adopter identifies with the transmitter, the more likely they are to adopt the idea in question (Soule 2004, 296).

These authors were all writing before the advent of social media, but their work supports the argument that the development of major social media networks like Facebook and Twitter, which have created broad, cross-national relational links between people with shared interests or perceived similarities, has had opened major new channels for the spread of ideas. There is a substantial literature on the role of social media particularly in the spread of the Arab Spring – the series of revolutionary movements that spread across North Africa and the Middle East beginning in Tunisia in 2011. Rane and Salem (2012) emphasize the role that identification between activists and mobilized groups from Tunisia and Egypt played during the Arab Spring, and they argue that social media was a critical channel in spreading ideas of freedom and democracy, though they also contend that local conditions and broader geopolitical factors had a greater role to play in the ultimate success or failure of the individual movements. The use of social media during the Arab Spring heralded a new and important channel of diffusion for political information and ideas. New forms of media continue to be influential in African politics and protest movements, as can be seen in the widespread use of the encrypted messaging service WhatsApp to spread political messaging and alleged 'fake news' in the run up to the 2019 Nigerian presidential election and the use of WhatsApp as a tool to organize nation-wide student protests in South Africa in 2015 and 2016.

Traditional and social media are not the only nonrelational channels through which ideas move. Strang and Meyer (1991) have highlighted the importance of institutions in facilitating diffusion

alongside and beyond relational links. Transnational institutions, and institutions with analogous counterparts in various countries (like government ministries), facilitate this sort of movement of ideas and practices across borders. Religion can operate in this regard, as major world religions share some key characteristics with other international institutions, such as analogous structures and hierarchies that exist across varied social and political contexts. The rise of Pentecostalism across Africa and its diaspora communities in the twentieth century is just one example of how transnational institutions have facilitated the spread of ideas in and beyond Africa. Take the example of the prosperity gospel, a tenet of Pentecostalism that originated with American evangelists in the mid-twentieth century. The prosperity gospel teaches that active participation in religious life on the part of the believer – through prayer, public and private expressions of faith, and monetary contributions to religious causes – will result God rewarding that faith with material wealth and security. Belief in the prosperity gospel is not common to all African Pentecostal Churches, but it is a feature in a major subset of them, and its movement through churches from America, to Nigeria, to South Africa and beyond over the last seventy years makes it a particularly successful and enduring example of institutionally-based diffusion. However, recent work by Naomi Haynes on Pentecostalism and the prosperity gospel on the Zambian Copperbelt points out that this idea, though global in its reach, is always deeply local in its interpretation. Haynes notes that despite the demonstrable failure of Pentecostalism on the Copperbelt to produce the sorts of lavish wealth sometimes promised by the prosperity gospel, this idea has retained salience in the town of Nsofu, where believers have reconfigured the idea of prosperity in terms of 'an interdependent material hierarchy' held together by social processes of patronage and exchange (Haynes 2012, 135-6). Importantly, Haynes argues that these processes are characteristic of life in Nsofu beyond the Pentecostal community, and the church's

investment in them serves a two-fold purpose: it makes the prosperity gospel a process in which adherents participate rather than an end they (might fail to) achieve, and it 'foster[s] the integration of believers in social networks that extend beyond the boundaries of their religious cohort', thus acting as an evangelical tool to attract converts to the church (Haynes 2012, 135).

The local adaptation of the prosperity gospel to the realities and idioms of daily life in Nsofu, Zambia is not unique in the context of the transnational diffusion of ideas. On the contrary, wherever ideas travel and in whatever contexts they are adopted, they are reinterpreted and adapted over time. In this way, ideas have their own genealogies, and within the emergence of new ideologies we can trace the imprints of preceding movements and ideas. The following case study, on Black Consciousness in South Africa, aims to do just that. It considers the way that ideas from elsewhere on the African continent and its diaspora in the Atlantic world came to influence an ideology that emerged from a student movement in the 1970s in South Africa. By tracing threads of anti-colonialism, Négritude, and Black Power in Black Consciousness thinking, the chapter traces channels of ideological diffusion between southern Africa, West Africa, the West Indies, and the United States. It also examines the contingencies and proximate causes that prompt new ideas to flourish, or to founder.

Black Consciousness: Building an Ideology

Black Consciousness emerged as an ideology out of South Africa's segregated university system in the late 1960s and early 1970s. In the context of apartheid's pervasive racial segregation, black university students on segregated campuses grew dissatisfied with the representation of the National Union of South African Students (NUSAS), an ostensibly multiracial but predominantly white organization. In 1969 some of those black students launched the South African Students' Organization (SASO), which set out to organize students on black, coloured, and Indian

campuses. SASO aimed to propagate an inclusive definition of black – beyond specifically black-African, to include other groups that were racially oppressed by the apartheid regime. Its leaders went on to develop Black Consciousness, an ideology that called for the psychological and physical liberation of (broadly defined) black South Africans, that propagated positivist images of black culture, and that deftly used the language of Christianity and students' relational networks as channels to spread their ideas.

Ideological influences on the development of Black Consciousness were numerous and diverse. Scholars have identified its roots in the local traditions of Xhosa intellectual history (Mangcu 2012), the anti-colonialism of Frantz Fanon (Turner and Alan 1986; Turner in Mngxitama et al. 2008, 76-81) and of Jean-Paul Sartre (Magaziner 2010, 42-43; More in Mngxitama et al. 2008, 49), and the Civil Rights, Black Power, and Black Theology movements of the United States (Magaziner 2010; Macqueen 2013, 453-458; Heffernan 2015, 176). This section will briefly consider, in turn, the ways that these ideas and philosophies influenced and were adopted by the students who pioneered BC in South Africa.

Fanon

Mabogo P. More, in his exploration of Biko's philosophical roots, declares, 'Fanon constitutes the pillar of Black Consciousness,' (More in Mngxitama et al. 2008, 48), and, while there are many pillars of BC, there is a great deal of truth in this, making Fanonian anti-colonialism a good place to start exploring what ideas underpinned Black Consciousness ideology. Frantz Fanon was born in Martinique in the West Indies, studied medicine in Paris, and went to work in a psychiatric hospital in Algeria, where he arrived the year before the outbreak of the Algerian Revolution. It was Fanon's experiences in Algeria that completed a process begun in France, of becoming a political activist and anti-colonial theorist. His two most famous texts, *Black Skins,*

White Masks and *The Wretched of the Earth* became foundational for revolutionaries and anti-colonial activists around the world, as Homi K. Bhabha outlines in his foreword to *The Wretched of the Earth* (Fanon 2004, xxx). Fanon's ideas reached Black Consciousness thinkers through traditional media – in this case, books. SASO activists Mamphela Ramphele and Barney Pityana recall SASO founder Steve Biko bringing a copy of *The Wretched of the Earth* to his room at university in the late 1960s to share with friends and comrades (Pityana et al. 1991, 28-29). Biko himself also recalls the importance of Fanon – among other thinkers elsewhere in Africa like Leopold Senghor and David Diop – in influencing the students who had founded SASO and were conceiving Black Consciousness (Gerhart in Mngxitama et al. 2008, 23). Fanon, though writing from a different context, had immediate points of similarity and identification for South African students, in their shared oppression by a white minority regime that constructed them as second-class citizens in their own country.

Fanon's primary contribution to Black Consciousness was his emphasis on the psychological liberation of the oppressed. A trained psychiatrist, Fanon was particularly interested in the psychology of the colonized in relation to the colonizer (Fanon 1986, 83-109) and argued that the colonial system imposes itself on the mind of the colonized: 'The arrival of the white man in [colonial Africa] shattered not only its horizons, but its psychological mechanisms. [A]lterity for the black man is not the black, but the white man,' (Fanon 1986, 97). From a psychoanalytic perspective, Fanon prescribed that a (hypothetical) colonized patient who suffered from a crippling racial inferiority complex must be helped to 'become conscious of his unconscious and abandon his attempts at a hallucinatory whitening, but also to act in the direction of change in the social structure,' (Fanon 1986, 100). Here the students who founded the Black Consciousness Movement took up this call, to liberate the psychology of black (in the racially inclusive,

oppressed sense) South Africans, and to awaken in them consciousness of their shared and lived blackness.

Fashion and Theatre

Biko famously remarked 'The most potent tool in the hands of the oppressor is the mind of the oppressed' (Biko quoted in Turner and Alan 1986, 21). Black Consciousness sought to reclaim the minds of the oppressed by promoting positive images of black history and culture. This manifested in a number of ways, among them the adoption of the slogan 'black is beautiful' from the US Civil Rights movement, and shifts in fashion to promote markers of blackness, like natural hair, and to discourage skin lightening creams. As Bheki Peterson has noted, 'the wearing of dashikis, beads, bracelets and accessories derived from or associated with Africa became vogue' during the early 1970s. Peterson has argued that this 'self-styling of young black bodies […] were all profound affirmations of African culture and assertive self-pride' (Peterson in Heffernan and Nieftagodien 2016, 19). Fashion and art have more typically been considered among the innovations that diffuse rather than as channels for diffusion, but in the case of Black Consciousness I argue they were both; as Peterson notes, wearing a dashiki or an afro signaled a set of political ideas beyond the fashion itself. For Black Consciousness thinkers, these changes were more than surface-level trends; they challenged the cultural hegemony of whiteness, as both the norm and an aspired ideal, in South Africa.

SASO undertook similar programmes with regard to the arts. They supported the work of Black Consciousness-affiliated theatre groups like Theatre Council of Natal (TECON), Dashiki, and the People's Experimental Theatre (PET), which all staged original work by local black playwrights and plays by established artists and activists from the diaspora. Dashiki staged Aimé Césaire's *Return to My Native Land* (*Cahier d'un Retour au Pays Natal*), and TECON and PET

both staged William Wellington Mackey's *Requiem for Brother* X in 1972 and 1973 (Peterson 2004, 175-176; Kruger 2005, 135-136). *Requiem for Brother X* was written by Mackey in 1966, as an elegy to Malcom X a year after his assassination in the United States; it offers a deep indictment of the 'dirty white politics' of that country, as described in TECON's program note (Kruger 2005, 136). As with fashion, these theatrical production acted as both channel and content for diffusing the anti-colonial and anti-racist ideas that Black Consciousness was borrowing from elsewhere and fashioning into its own. By staging such productions at SASO events, students in the audience were prompted to recognize aspects of their own struggle in events overseas, creating affinity between disparate groups and different political contexts.

Négritude

Each of the theatrical choices discussed above points to the BCM's outward-looking adoption of diasporic trends and ideas. Césaire was one of the foundational figures in Négritude, a movement that originated in literary theory but came to offer a broad, positivist embrace of African customs and culture that bridged art and entered the political realm. Some of Négritude's most prominent proponents became Africa's early statesmen, like Léopold Senghor, the first president of independent Senegal, who Steve Biko identified as a 'very important' influence on his thinking in the late 1960s (Gerhart in Mngxitama et al. 2008, 23). Négritude influenced the BCM's celebration of black art and creative production; it also linked SASO leaders to political ideas and philosophies that developed in other parts of Africa and its diaspora. Césaire, like Fanon, was from Martinique; Senghor was from Senegal, and the two had met while studying in Paris in the 1930s. It was here, in the metropole of the French empire, that Négritude was conceived, not only to rebut the racism that Senghor, Césaire, and other black students in Paris encountered, but to build up the positive consciousness of black colonial subjects through a project of

disalienation. (Césaire 1972, 26). This positive consciousness, centred around race, was influential to the students of SASO, and it helped them link their own struggle to that of black people elsewhere in the world, through the channel of artistic production. But SASO students in 1970s South Africa experienced and conceived of race somewhat differently than had Césaire and Senghor in Paris in the 1930s. As has been noted, SASO took a more collective approach to defining what it meant to be black than had its predecessors, including Indians and coloured people, who were also oppressed under apartheid's firm colour bar. This inclusion was born of their national context and prompted them to remake aspects of international ideas, like Négritude, to fit their particular circumstances, even as they linked their struggle to others abroad.

Black Power and US Civil Rights

One important link, as the repeated staging of Mackey's play suggests, was to the black community in the United States. SASO was conceived in 1968, the year of Martin Luther King Jr.'s assassination in America. The US Civil Rights Movement had been waging war on America's enduring racial segregation for more than a decade by the time of King's death, and the scope of the anti-racism movement in the United States had expanded from the civil disobedience and non-violent resistance that he championed to more confrontational protest politics. For many, Malcolm X was the primary figurehead of this more radical arm of the movement for racial equality in the US. X, who had been a leader in the Nation of Islam (NOI) and then later of his own Muslim Mosque, Incorporated (MMI), rejected the integration that King's Southern Christian Leadership Conference championed. Integration, he worried, meant incorporating black Americans into white American society, rather than creating space for them as social and political equals. Years later, this idea resonated deeply with SASO founders, whose

experience of student politics within the multiracial space of NUSAS had been frustratingly silencing, and dominated by the group's white majority.

Malcolm X was also an inspirational figure for students at home in the United States, and he influenced the leaders of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), which emerged as part of the Civil Rights Movement at American Historically Black Universities and Colleges (HBCUs) in the 1960s. By the end of that decade SNCC was becoming more radical, and under the leadership of Stokely Carmichael (Kwame Ture) it took up the call for Black Power and became increasingly critical of liberal political groups and the mainstream civil rights movement. Carmichael, a black American with roots in the Caribbean, became president of SNCC in 1966; his rejection of more mainstream Civil Rights organizing was influenced by Malcolm X (Adeleke 2017, 82). Carmichael's pivoting of SNCC away from white liberal political groups was an important example half a world away when, just two years later, SASO began to do the same. Steve Biko credited public statements from Carmichael and other SNCC members with influencing the organization of SASO. He noted that the text *Black Power*, by Carmichael and Charles Hamilton, made 'a hell of a lot of sense' to him and other students who were thinking of separating from NUSAS, though he pointed to important differences in the South African and American struggles (Gerhart in Mngxitama et al. 2008, 24). This and other books from black America, like James Cone's *Black Theology*, played deeply influential roles in shaping the thinking of SASO leaders; Biko said that such diasporic literature had a

> 'complimentary effect upon a basic attitude formed primarily from experience, from an analysis of the situation as one sees it. And it helps to sharpen one's focus, it helps to make the guy much more confident about whatever he's actually articulating. The common experience of the Third World people.' (Gerhart in Mngxitama et al. 2008, 24)

This quote indicates, and goes some way to explaining, the importance of solidarity with anti-racist, anti-colonial struggles in other parts of the world for Black Consciousness thinkers. Their ideological links to Fanon, Négritude, and Black Power solidified this solidarity and fundamentally informed the ideas that made up the movement, those these were reinterpreted for use at home. It was rooted in students' lived experiences of oppression in South Africa, but it was also given form and voice through a set of global anti-racist, anti-colonial ideas. Black Consciousness was outward looking in as much as it was deeply rooted in South Africa's own struggle. In the next section I'll examine how, having developed its ideology, the Black Consciousness Movement began to propagate it at home.

Building a Movement

By the 1969 launch of SASO its student leaders had assembled a set of ideas that informed their political thinking. They had put together an ideology based, in part, on how anti-racist and anti-colonial literature, political theory, and art from elsewhere in Africa and from the African diaspora reflected their own experiences of life under apartheid. Once SASO was launched, their next challenge would be to share this ideology with a wider audience, and to mobilize a constituency around their ideas.

Having emerged out of the structures of political organization at universities – primarily NUSAS and other multi-racial, liberal groups – SASO rooted itself in universities. The racial segregation that apartheid imposed on tertiary education meant that they had ready-made spaces in which to mobilize. They organized through relational channels, through their own networks at the five segregated university colleges that had been purpose-built for African, Indian, and coloured students. These were located around the country, in areas that the South African government had designated exclusively for the use of distinct racial and/or ethnic groups. By electing to mobilize

across racial as well as ethnic lines, SASO was able to use this geographic distance to its advantage. Rather than each of these universities remaining isolated outposts for training civil servants, as the apartheid state had envisioned, in them SASO was able to create nodes of political activism at black campuses across South Africa (Heffernan, 2019).

Biko's quote about how the writing of thinkers like Stokely Carmichael and black American theologian James Cone resonated with the lived experiences of early SASO leaders became a key facet of their early mobilization among students on these campuses: SASO sought to link the lived experiences of black South African students in an oppressive society to ideas about liberation and cultural celebration that drew on influences like Fanon, Césaire, and Malcolm X. In particular, they set about implementing the psychological liberation advocated by Fanon, and BC proponents criticized earlier liberation organizations for not having done this already. In a 2005 interview reflecting on the foundation of BC and how they differed from the movements that had come before them, Strini Moodley pointed to the idea of psychological liberation:

> 'Basically in the '60s we looked at the ANC, we looked at the PAC, we looked at the Unity Movement, we looked at all of them and we said, these guys have got the wrong programme. […] [Y]ou have to devise a philosophy that can break the chains of that psychological oppression,' (Klein et al. in Mngxitama et al. 2008, 268).

Implementing that philosophy on the ground meant implementing concrete programs to change the self-perception of black South Africans. These programs would become channels through which SASO would spread its own ideology of Black Consciousness. In early 1970, Biko, in his position as president of SASO, penned a letter to the Student Representative Council (SRC) presidents at each of the campuses where SASO was based, outlining its aims. Two of the six aims he enumerated dealt with changing the way black students thought of themselves: one was

to ‘establish a solid identity amongst the non-white students’, and the other ‘to boost up the morale of the non-white students to heighten their own confidence in themselves’ (Biko 2002, 15).

The use of SRCs was an important mechanism through which SASO recruited supporters. Throughout the 1960s there had been appetite on the black campuses to affiliate to NUSAS, but its interracial structure and liberal politics made it unpalatable to the apartheid-supporting administrations of the university colleges. By 1968 the SRCs of both Fort Hare and the University College of the North had waged battles with their university administrations to be allowed to affiliate to NUSAS, but both were unsuccessful (Massey 2010, Heffernan 2019). The arrival of SASO on campuses the following year presented an opportunity for the SRCs to participate in political organization at the national level, and from the perspective of administrators the self-segregating and liberal-criticizing SASO seemed to adhere to the principles of apartheid itself. They allowed the organization to set up on campus.

Working through SRCs enabled SASO to expand its base and spread its ideas exponentially faster than it would have been able to do otherwise, thanks to the SRCs’ institutional capacity, resources, and links across universities. Scholars have noted that university students were an especially fertile ground for the new organization to plant the intellectual theories that influenced Black Consciousness thinking (Magaziner 2010, Brown 2016). The SRCs facilitated access to their students by organizing mass meetings which SASO leaders could address, by providing financial and material support, and by circulating important literature. Much of the literature that inspired Black Consciousness thinkers was banned in apartheid South Africa, but SRCs and SASO reprinted and circulated excerpts wherever possible, as well as writing and circulating their own texts. In 1972 the University of the North was embroiled in a scandal when the

university Rector recalled hundreds of copies of a diary that the SRC had printed to be handed out to students. The diary contained, in addition to space to make note of dates and times, excerpts of SASO literature and its manifesto (Heffernan 2019).

SASO also organized mass meetings to bring together students on individual campuses, as well as from different university colleges, creating networks of politically conscious black students across South Africa. Each year a General Students' Council (GSC) was held to report back on projects undertaken in the past year, to plan the program for the next year, and to elect the coming year's executive. These multi-day events sometimes involved creative performances, like the plays discussed in the previous section, as well as addresses by speakers. In addition to prominent SASO activists, the SASO leaders reached out to speakers from elsewhere to address their GSCs. In 1971, SASO invited James Cone, the black American theologian who pioneered the idea of Black Theology, to come address their GSC. When the South African government denied Cone a visa to travel, SASO photocopied his article 'Toward a Black Theology' from *Ebony* magazine and distributed it to all of the delegates at the GSC, despite the fact that *Ebony* – a black American publication – was banned in South Africa at the time (Sono 1993, 48-49).

Cone's invitation, and the inclusion in the GSC of his article on the importance of Black Theology, are indicative of the importance of Christianity, and Christian imagery in Black Consciousness. Magaziner (2010) makes this explicit in his description (taken from his informants) of BC leaders as 'prophets'; Macqueen argues that the inclusion of Christianity in Black Consciousness, most explicitly through Black Theology, enabled activists to exercise entwined secular and spiritual identities (Macqueen 2016, 31). It also acted as a mechanism to organize through on-campus Christian groups (which were allowed to operate with less administrative suspicion than SASO) and gave BC activists a shared language of liberation and

salvation, which gave their ideas currency among some Christian students (Heffernan 2019, 64-65).

As well as the annual GSCs, SASO held more frequent 'formation schools' to build networks between students and encourage the spread of ideas through these channels. These were smaller gatherings held on or near a SASO branch several times throughout the year. Formation schools were designed to offer leadership training to those at the student committee branch level, and each formation school focused on a particular area of Black Consciousness thought or practice, from approaches to education, the history of black struggle in South Africa, to the ideology of Black Consciousness itself. Formation schools ran over several days and were structured around 'in-depth discussions around major inputs by one or two picked people' (Gerhart in Mngxitama et al. 2008, 35). The branch-level leadership that came out of training at these formation schools were then responsible for propagating BC ideology to the wider SASO membership on campuses.

Beyond mobilizing within student communities, SASO also sought to reach out to other members of society. Initially this was pioneered through Black Community Programmes (BCP), a community development initiative spearheaded by students from SASO, but which soon became an organization in its own right. Leslie Hadfield's *Liberation and Development: Black Consciousness community programs in South Africa* (2016) offers the fullest historical account to date of the projects that the BCP undertook. Hadfield examines a community clinic, a leather-goods shop, and a community newspaper run by BCP and how they built self-reliance and workers' dignity in the communities where they were implemented, thus fulfilling some of BC's key tenets. (Hadfield, 2016).

> '[BCP and SASO] activists also hoped to develop the whole black person. For them, liberation meant having the ability to reach one's full potential – psychologically, socially, materially, spiritually, and politically. In this sense, Black Consciousness community work is an example of development initiatives that have stemmed from overarching ideologies of liberation […],' (Hadfield 2016, 5).

Black Consciousness was, of course, one such ideology that drew and built upon many others. Its early proponents faced challenges in how to propagate their ideas to a wider audience, but through a variety of relational and institutional channels – organizing through universities and their SRCs, employing mass meetings and training sessions like GSCs and formation schools, distributing philosophical and political literature, and performing outreach in local communities – they were exceptionally successful. Gail Gerhart, writing in 1979, noted that SASO achieved deep ideological diffusion within its ranks – surpassing that of other liberation organizations at the time (Gerhart 1979, 270).

As perhaps South Africa's most recognized home-grown ideology, Black Consciousness offers a fruitful case study for understanding the diffusion of political ideas. Its founders were influenced and drew upon philosophies from across Africa and its diaspora, primarily through nonrelational channels like literature, theatre, and media. In the anti-colonial writing of Fanon, and the anti-racist speeches of Malcolm X, they saw a mirror of their own lived experiences under apartheid. But they didn't simply appropriate these ideas from other contexts and impose them on their own situation. As Magaziner has noted in BC activists' use of ideas from black America, 'activists copied, but they also translated; they read words from one context and wrote them into their own,' (Magaziner 2010, 48). They did this by employing a number of techniques: they selected an initial audience (black university students) who were especially receptive to the type of

message they had to offer and to whom they had direct links; they ensured deep as well as wide ideological cohesion by running annual and semi-annual workshops to discuss the ideas that they were promoting; they did outreach in their communities and expanded their ideological reach beyond the demographic of university students. They also became teachers.

After waves of expulsions of SASO-affiliated students from black campuses in 1972 and 1974, many SASO leaders and members left university and became teachers in the government 'Bantu Education' school system. This placed them in a uniquely powerful position to propagate Black Consciousness ideas to a new generation of students. Scholars have noted the impact of these teachers on the generation of students who rose up against the apartheid education system in Soweto on June 16, 1976 (Mkhabela, 2001; Ndlovu 2004; Heffernan 2019; Glaser 2000; Brown 2016).

Black Consciousness has long been acknowledged as an important (though not singular) influence on the school students of Soweto 1976 (Mkhabela 2001; Brown 2016; Glaser 2000; Hirson 1979; Pohlandt-McCormack 2006). Those students also mark an important way in which Black Consciousness ideology was carried on, beyond the organizational reach of SASO and the BCM themselves. In the wake of the Soweto Uprising, the apartheid government initiated crackdowns on the BCM and its affiliates. In September 1977 Steve Biko was beaten to death while in police custody, and the following month nineteen BC-affiliated organizations, including SASO and BCP, were officially banned. Black Consciousness leaders who had escaped detention went into exile, but a lack of functioning structures hampered their ability to organize from abroad. Some joined alternate organizations with stronger exile presence, like the ANC, and some pursued Black Consciousness ideas from underground in South Africa through the Azanian People's Organisation (AZAPO). But at an above-ground level, the students of Soweto had

shown what young people instilled with powerful ideas could do: they could change the course of their country, and act as inspiration for those beyond its borders.

During the 1980s the dominant political ideology among South African liberation movements shifted away from Black Consciousness and back to liberal multiracialism, as espoused by the ANC and its allies. Some BC proponents were converted – in detention, in exile, and on what seemed to be the inexorable tide of multiracialism in the decade before apartheid ended. But the ideas that Black Consciousness had championed still endured, especially among students. In the early 1980s whole branches of the new ANC-affiliated Congress of South African Students (COSAS) continued to espouse Black Consciousness (Heffernan 2016). Decades later, when university students erupted in South Africa's largest post-apartheid protests to date, Black Consciousness was in the headlines again. These student activists quoted Biko and Fanon on their protest signs, mixing these with the theoretical framework of intersectionality, which they had drawn from black American scholarship. But they largely jettisoned the Christian imagery that had been so fundamental for early BC thinkers in the 1970s. Like Fanon and Négritude before it, Black Consciousness was being reprised and reimagined in a new context and by a new generation.

Conclusion

This article has sought to show, through the example of Black Consciousness, just some of the many ways that ideas move across space and time in African politics, and to point to some of the factors that can make those ideas flourish or wither in particular places. Shared experience – be it from local or national experience of the same political regime, or the global experience of oppression through empire and colonialism – is a critical fertilizer on the ground where ideas are planted. The use of art – written, visual, and performed – as well as fashion, not only signals

closely held ideas, but it can also be a persuasive way to explain them to the uninitiated. Political and philosophical literature further theorize and expand upon those ideas. Concrete implementation of theoretical ideas – implementing ideas about self-reliance through community development projects, for instance – can help bring concepts off of a page and into people's lives. These were all ways that the ideas that comprised Black Consciousness moved during the 1960s and 1970s in South Africa. Some continue to be effective today.

More broadly, historians and scholars of the movement of ideas face challenges in tracing the development of particular ideas, precisely because these ideas are regularly being interpreted and reinterpreted for use in new and varied contexts. The literature on diffusion can help by making visible some of the channels through which ideas move, and it offers a language to speak about this fundamentally abstract topic. Here I have highlighted the way that some of the traditional diffusion channels – mass and social media, religion, institutions, and personal networks, for instance – have acted to spread ideas in particular examples, in South Africa and elsewhere on the continent. I have also argued for the inclusion of new channels in our repertoire of understanding the diffusion of ideas – highlighting the role of art, theatre, and fashion in propagating Black Consciousness ideas. As scholars of ideas and ideologies, it is imperative to consider the ideas we study as products of larger, iterative processes. They move through space and time, and are reshaped by each new context in which they are adopted. New ideas bear the imprints of older ones, but they also bring together new and productive combinations in their own rights.

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